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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

Memorandum



THE SITUATION IN VIETNAM

Information as of 1600
26 March 1965

PREPARED FOR THE NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL
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HIGHLIGHTS

Recent military attacks on the DRV have helped raise morale in South Vietnam, but there is a danger that morale will again drop sharply if the Saigon government cannot follow through with significant political and military progress against the Communists. On the Communist side, it now appears that in the coming days they will play heavily on threats that they are going to step up their support to the Viet Cong through the dispatch of more arms and possibly volunteers. They will be seeking to raise further international apprehension over the chances of greater bloc military involvement in Vietnam, hoping thereby that Washington can be pressured into dropping or slowing its own military program.

I. The Military Situation in South Vietnam:

There has been a slight intensification of activity by both the Viet Cong and government forces. Several small-scale attacks have been reported in guerrilla-infested Darlac and Kontum provinces in the central highlands, while the coastal railroad has been sabotaged in two widely separate areas (Paras 2-4). The press continues to report Viet Cong troop build-ups in the vicinity of Saigon (Para 5). A large-scale government heliborne operation in Choung Thien Province has been terminated with disappointing results (Para. 6).

II. Political Developments in South Vietnam:

Saigon's foreign minister believes morale is on the upswing in the wake of the air strikes (Para. 1). ARVN combat troop morale is also reported rising (Para. 4). The US Mission in Saigon also believes that there has been a noticeable improvement (Para 5), although it sees a danger that this could change quickly (Para. 6).

Premier Quat has indicated that he still considers the military a stumbling block to a more stable government in Saigon (Para. 3). A Catholic leader, lukewarm toward Quat and suspicious of the

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Buddhists, has reported a rumor that various generals may attempt a coup during Ambassador Taylor's trip to Washington (Para. 7).

III. Military Developments in North Vietnam:
We now have partial photographic results of the 26 March air strike against several DRV radar sites. These photographs indicate only moderate damage to the installations (Paras. 1-3). . . . [REDACTED]

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IV. Other Communist Military Developments: No bloc military movements related to Vietnam have been detected. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] stories alleging that Communist China is interfering with the delivery of Soviet aid to the DRV (Paras. 2 and 3). [REDACTED]

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V. Communist Political Developments: Official bloc propaganda organs are fully backing the 22 March Liberation Front call for weapons aid and, if necessary, volunteers (Paras. 1-3). . . Moscow is privately continuing its probes for any sign of change in US policy on Vietnam (Para. 6). Propaganda emphasis on the gas issue has now shifted to an official level; Moscow has delivered a protest note to the US, and the DRV has issued a government statement (Paras. 7 and 8).

VI. Other Major Aspects: The Italian Socialists are moving to undercut the Moro government's support of US policy in Vietnam by exploiting the gas issue (Para. 1). Prince Sihanouk has again threatened to break relations with the US if another Cambodian is killed by a South Vietnamese incursion (Para. 2).

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I. MILITARY SITUATION IN SOUTH VIETNAM

1. The military situation in South Vietnam reveals a slight intensification of operational activity by both the Viet Cong and government forces.

2. MACV's military report for 24 March shows 56 Communist-initiated incidents, 14 occurring in the reporting period. Three armed attacks and one ambush were listed; the bulk of incidents reported comprised harassing fire against government troops, posts, and watchtowers, hamlet entry and harassment, sabotage against land lines of communication, and mine detonations.

3. In the I Corps area, the Viet Cong sabotaged the rail lines in Quang Nam Province. Within the II Corps, Communist guerrillas staged two attacks in Darlac Province, one against a land development center defended by a Popular Forces platoon and the other against a Regional Forces company. The first assault resulted in two government soldiers killed and 100 houses burned; the second action produced only minor friendly casualties. In Kontum Province, a government military outpost was attacked and destroyed by an unknown number of Viet Cong. Small arms fire was placed on a district chief's vehicle in Quang Duc Province and on a new life hamlet in Tuyen Duc Province. In the III Corps, an ARVN supply convoy was ambushed in Binh Duong Province, killing eight government troops.

4. In Long Khanh Province, the Viet Cong exploded mines under an armored train some 50 miles northeast of Saigon, overturning one armored car, derailling four freight cars, damaging a considerable number of rail sections and crossties, and causing friendly personnel casualties of two killed and six wounded. A Popular Forces platoon in Long An Province and a government post in Binh Duong Province received harassing fire. Within the IV Corps, mortar and small arms fire was directed against posts and watchtowers in Phong Dinh, Chuong Thien, and An Xuyen Provinces. No current actions were reported in the Capital Military District.

5. Reports continue to appear in the press of suspected large concentrations of Viet Cong heavily equipped with mortars moving into districts adjacent to Saigon. Government artillery has reportedly bombarded the suspect enemy positions for five consecutive days.

6. The level of government-initiated ground operations of battalion strength or larger increased to 19, with 10 search-and-destroy operations initiated on 24 March, none of which resulted in significant contact with the Viet Cong. Unconfirmed press reports state that a large-scale helicopter and ground operation involving elements of two government battalions, initiated on 25 March against a suspected Viet Cong concentration in Chuong Thien Province, ended today after only light contact with the elusive guerrillas. Nine insurgents were killed, one captured, and an ammunition dump blown up. During the operation, a US Army helicopter gunner was wounded by enemy anti-aircraft fire. No other government casualties were reported. Company-size or smaller operations conducted on 24 March declined to 2,081. Only six contacts were made with the Viet Cong, with minor losses reported on both sides.

7. USAF/VNAF combat air operations increased sharply, particularly in terms of the number of close air support, interdiction, and logistics missions flown. Results from American and Vietnamese aircraft missions for 24 March indicate 18 Viet Cong were killed and 99 structures destroyed. The press reports that American B-57 jet bombers and F-100 fighters yesterday bombed and strafed suspected Communist guerrilla concentrations in Tay Ninh and Binh Dinh provinces, the results of which were not immediately available.

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II. POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN SOUTH VIETNAM

1. South Vietnam's foreign minister, Tran Van Do, told Ambassador Taylor yesterday that he felt morale in the country was definitely on the upswing. He believed that the air strikes were causing concern in North Vietnam, and that some consideration should now be given to an acceptable basis for ending the war at a proper time. Do said that he considered it unrealistic to expect Hanoi, for reasons of face and self-preservation, to capitulate unconditionally unless completely defeated; he therefore thought a formula should be found to give Hanoi a choice between surrender and continuing the war.

2. Premier Quat, in a separate conversation with the ambassador on the same day, discussed various problems including manpower needs. He again indicated that he felt the present shortage could be met by the accelerated mobilization program and that he foresaw no need to seek third-country combat forces. He indicated that this did not apply to possible US-force increases in the magnitude of 10,000 for support activities.

3. Quat also said that he regarded prospects good for greater political stability except for difficulties with the military who still considered themselves an element apart from the government. He indicated some concern over the reported decisions on command changes taken by the Armed Forces Council on 20 March, and agreed that it might be helpful if he could persuade the generals to suspend Council meetings for as long as a year until things stabilize. Quat showed an interest in a US evaluation of the 45 province chiefs--10 rated excellent, five inadequate, and 30 adequate--and of the new minister of economy as unsatisfactory. Quat said he would consult his cabinet on these matters, but implied that changes would only occur gradually.

4. Colonel Tran Ngoc Huyen, chief of the army's psychological warfare directorate, recently cited the 150-200 daily letters from combat troops in the field, in response to army psywar broadcasts. He said they indicate a sharp increase in morale since the air strikes and a belief that victory over the Viet Cong

is now possible "in the measurable future." Huyen voiced concern with Generals Thi and Ky, commenting that he received some troop complaints about the pre-occupation with politics and luxury living of senior officers while the ranks were giving their lives in the field.

5. US Mission reports on the effects of the air strikes on South Vietnam agree that a noticeable morale improvement has occurred, particularly as the bombings have become more sustained in the past week. Enthusiasm appears greatest among the military. Approval is also apparent in the comments of government officials, top Buddhist leaders, and various elements of the Catholic community. Although much of the support is tied to notions of a deeper US commitment, an early end to the war, or a stronger negotiating position vis-a-vis Hanoi, the embassy has observed less tendency to consider the burden now entirely up to the US than had been feared.

6. At the same time, there is a danger that early disappointment over the likelihood of internal improvement or peace--now reportedly increasingly discussed in the provinces--could cause morale to drop sharply. Saigon has asked for some photos of the strike results to counter Viet Cong propaganda that civilians are major targets.

7. Father Quynh, a prominent leader of Catholic refugee circles, recently added his own lukewarm appraisal of the Quat government to similar comments of his colleagues. Quynh left the impression that his group planned no dramatic initiatives, although he voiced suspicion of Buddhist intentions and also concern over reports of Air Vice Marshal Ky's role in the recent Armed Forces Council meeting. He reported a rumor, however, that certain generals might attempt a coup next week during Ambassador Taylor's absence, a rumor for which there is no currently known substantiation.

8. Buddhist lay leader Tran Quang Thuan has outlined a reported plan under which the Buddhists would, in phases over the next year, attempt to establish a lay anti-Communist organization. Thuan said the organization, under a lay "brain trust",

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would permit Buddhist monks to retire entirely to religious matters, unless the religion came under challenge. He added that Thich Tri Quang, in the interim, hoped to devote himself to a program of increased training and discipline of Buddhist monks.

9. Outbreaks of bubonic plague and cholera are prevalent in at least six provinces of central Vietnam, and some cases have been noted in Saigon. According to a World Health Organization spokesman, deaths from the plague include two in Saigon and one in Binh Dinh Province. There is little information to date on whether the diseases have attacked the refugee circles in several central provinces, or whether Viet Cong forces are affected.

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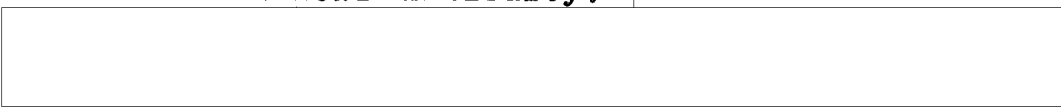


III. MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS IN NORTH VIETNAM

1. Only partial photographic results have so far been received on the coordinated strikes against four North Vietnamese radar sites by US naval aircraft on 26 March. About 75 planes took part in the raids which hit installations at Bach Long Island, Ha Tinh, Cape Mui Ron, and Vinh Son at about 1400 local Vietnam time (0100 EST).

2. The photos confirm pilot observations of additional light damage to the Vinh Son installation, which was also hit in a strike on 22 March. No damage was apparent in the photos to the radar antennae at Cape Mui Ron and Bach Long Island. Photographic results of the strike on the Ha Tinh site are not yet available.

3. Two US pilots were recovered safely after their aircraft ditched at sea following the strike. One aircraft was shot down, while the other experienced mechanical difficulty.


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IV. OTHER COMMUNIST MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS

1. We have not detected any bloc military movements which appear related to the situation in Vietnam during the past twenty-four hours.

2. With regard to Soviet military aid to North Vietnam, [redacted] stories alleging that Communist China is interfering with the delivery of such assistance. [redacted]

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[redacted] the Chinese were insisting that they take over military aid shipments at the Soviet border and handle delivery of the equipment of the DRV themselves.

3. The Soviets claimed they had tried without success to overcome Chinese objections by arguing that it was essential for Soviet technicians to accompany the shipments--which included "air-to-ground rockets and antiaircraft missiles"--in order to install the equipment and teach the Vietnamese how to use the new weapons. [redacted]

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V. COMMUNIST POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

1. Official bloc propaganda organs are throwing their full weight behind the 22 March Liberation Front call for weapons and, if necessary, volunteers. Peiping and Hanoi each have replayed the other's comment on the Front statement. The North Vietnamese Army journal Quan Doi Nhan Dan, as quoted by Peiping, voiced the readiness of native southerners, regrouped north in 1954, to respond to the call of the Front, return to the south, take up arms, and annihilate the enemy. Hanoi radio on 26 March reported the 25 March Peiping People's Daily editorial welcoming the Front statement. The North Vietnamese broadcast quoted the Chinese as saying that they "solemnly declare" that they will send "all necessary material aid, including weapons," to the South Vietnamese "people" and that they are "ready" to send their own men whenever the Front wants them.

2. Moscow TASS on 24 March repeated the Front call for increased weapons aid as well as its contingent request for volunteers. Komsomol Pravda, the official Soviet youth journal, on 26 March highlighted the fact that Russian women and children are volunteering to serve in Vietnam alongside men who are willing to fight for Communist North Vietnam "to the last drop of blood."

3. Reuters reported on 26 March that a North Vietnamese Embassy spokesman in Moscow asserted that "entire Russian Army units" have volunteered to fight in Vietnam, but that the Soviet Government had, as yet, made no decision on their offers. No Soviet Government official has yet mentioned the possibility of regular army units volunteering for Vietnam.

4. In an effort to give the impression of world-wide support for the Front call, Hanoi radio reported on 26 March that volunteers from Hungary and Burma have offered to fight in Vietnam. Radio Havana has reminded its people that Cuba was the first to offer to send volunteers to Vietnam.

5. North Korea on 26 March also jumped on the bandwagon with a formal statement in support of the Front call, affirming that "all the people of the

socialist states should offer all forms of aid" and should, if necessary, "dispatch their volunteer fighters." According to the statement, Pyongyang will give "all types of material aid...including weapons" to Vietnam.

6. The Soviets continue their private efforts to probe for some signs of change in US policy toward Vietnam, especially regarding diplomatic action to bring about a negotiated settlement. A Soviet diplomat told a US correspondent in London that Moscow just doesn't understand US motives in the crisis and wonders how far it is prepared to go in defining its terms for a settlement. The Soviet official maintained that the degree of Soviet assistance to North Vietnam will depend upon an "accurate evaluation" of US intentions. Much the same line was taken in a 23 March conversation in Moscow between K. Rudnev, vice chairman of the Soviet Council of Ministers, and the Canadian ambassador. While Rudnev was probably giving his own personal views, Ambassador Ford concluded that his remarks concerning the goals of US policy in Vietnam reflected a "genuine bewilderment" on the part of the USSR as to US intentions.

7. The emphasis in bloc propaganda on the gas issue has now shifted to an official level. Moscow on 26 March, delivered a Foreign Ministry note to the US Embassy charging that the use of "poisonous" gases in South Vietnam had the approval of the US State and Defense Departments. The US Embassy in Moscow believes the Soviets probably intend the note as a "major propaganda piece", and that they will soon publish it in the Moscow press.

8. The Hanoi Government also issued an official statement on 26 March assailing the use of "toxic" gases in Vietnam. The statement called the action an "intolerable provocation" against the Vietnamese, and claimed that it would only result in rallying more "vigorous" support from the "socialist countries and the world" for the insurgent war effort.

9. So far, the US air strike of 26 March has not drawn a major propaganda reaction from the bloc. Hanoi, as usual, claimed great success in shooting down the attacking aircraft. According to the North

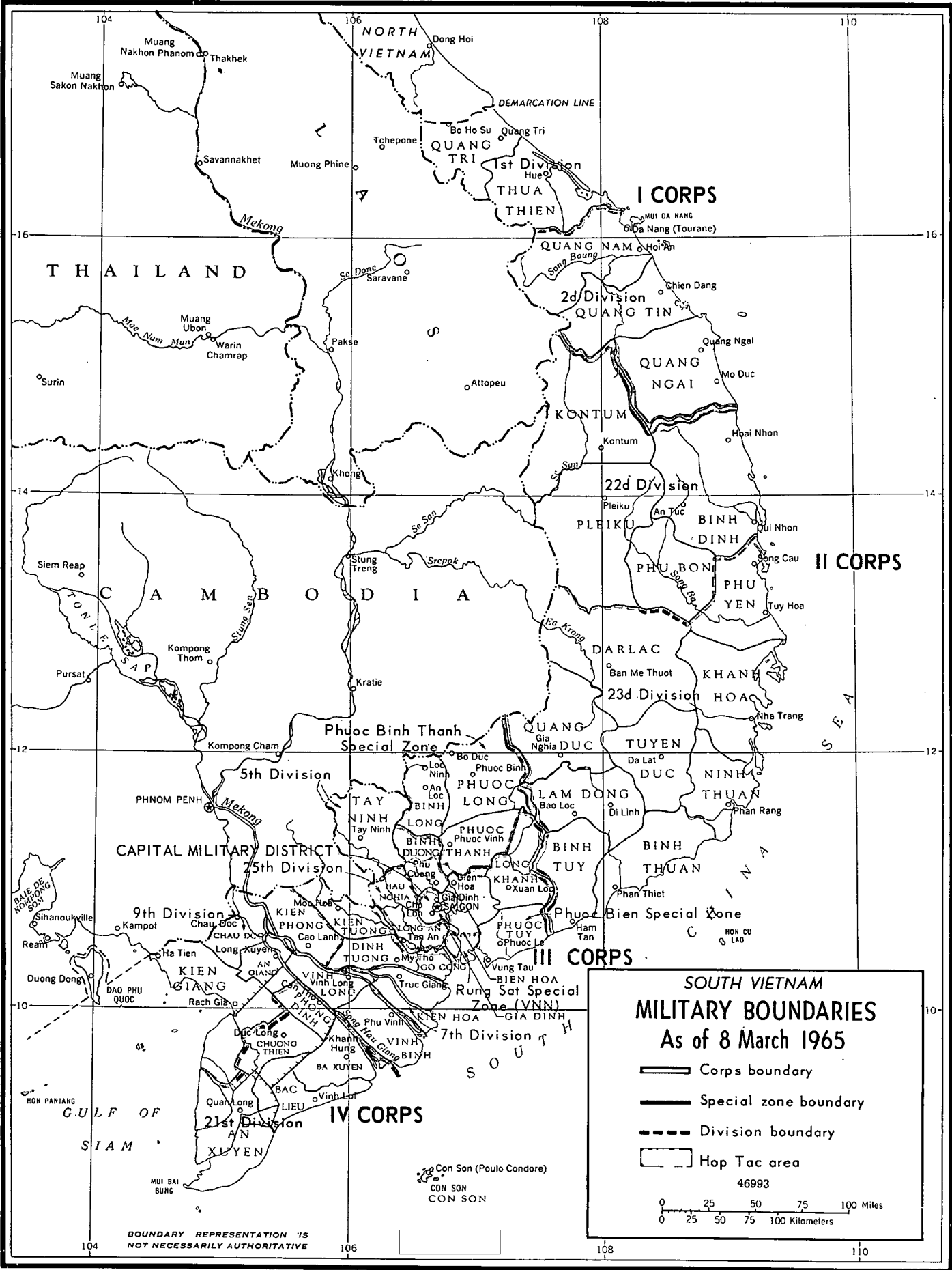
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Vietnamese, 16 planes were downed, making a total of 77 since the raids began. Both Moscow and Peiping have repeated the North Vietnamese claims.

VI. OTHER MAJOR ASPECTS

1. The use of nonlethal gas in Vietnam led the Italian Socialist directorate to issue a resolution on 24 March condemning the US action. The Christian Democratic - Socialist coalition had publicly backed the US position in Vietnam last month, but the Socialist reaction to the gas issue seems likely to undermine this support to some extent. Socialist leader Nenni believed the incident "would not cause difficulty within the government itself" but he "recognized that the issue could assume dangerous proportions in Parliament."

2. Prince Sihanouk has again threatened to break relations with the US if another Cambodian is killed as a result of a South Vietnamese border incursion. Sihanouk's "last warning" came in response to alleged South Vietnamese border violations on 21 and 23 March when eight Cambodian casualties were reported, including three killed. Sihanouk has issued such warnings before, especially during periods of heightened border tension, without following through. A serious incident shortly after this latest warning, however, could force his hand.



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